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Using Technology To Turn A University Degree Into A Job: Starting In Secondary School

| By Shelley Kinash |

This article is written for all students who plan to go to university and then start a career. It is also written for the teachers, parents and friends who support these students. Students should begin thinking about their careers long before they graduate or even start university. Planning, preparations and strategies should begin shortly after primary school.

The strategies and approaches addressed in this article are all through the use of technology. Some of the strategies are not possible without internet-connected technologies, and other strategies become more effective through their use.

I have been given a tremendous opportunity to learn the secrets of turning a university degree into a successful and satisfying career through the use of technology-enhanced strategies. The Australian Office for Learning and Teaching has commissioned and funded a research project on graduate employability, and I am fortunate to be one of the leaders of the research. The research has taken me to careers fairs, universities and company head offices in Melbourne, Brisbane, Canberra, Townsville, Hobart and Alice Springs. I have had the opportunity to have conversations with, and read surveys completed by, university graduates, students, employers, educators and career development professionals. In addition, I have had online correspondence about employability from Canada, USA, Singapore, Finland, India, Ireland, England, Scotland, Japan and South Africa.

People are keen to talk and even more interested to listen. Many of the university graduates are disappointed and frustrated. They thought that they could sign up for a university degree, study, complete their courses and finish with the ticket to a high-paying, prestigious career. However, for many, this outcome is not forthcoming. Many feel that employees are unfairly asking for experience they do not have and

that their degrees are not qualifying them for the jobs they want.

This is particularly discouraging and anger-provoking for international students. In most cases they paid much more for their degrees than domestic students. Many international students feel that migration agents and university recruiters made false promises that an Australian degree would automatically open doors to jobs, wealth and quality of life. Many are facing expiring visas and reluctantly returning to their home countries.

The employers also have stories to tell, some of success and some of disgust. A few messages from employers are heard repeatedly and with great emphasis. Employers assert that a degree alone is not enough. They want to know what the student did that made them rise above and stand out.

Did the student push boundaries and pursue an international opportunity where another language is spoken? Employers ask that applicants read instructions carefully, and follow them precisely, especially matching one's knowledge, skills, attributes and experiences to the selection criteria. Be confident but not cocky. Applicants must be careful not to display attitudes that they are entitled to jobs and realise that employers are not obligated to hire. In interviews, applicants must answer questions directly and succinctly in a confident, clear voice. Do not ramble. Be willing to start in a junior position or as an intern and work your way up. Do your research. At career fairs, do not ask representatives what their company is or does, or ask "what jobs do you have?" This question is too general and demonstrates poor focus. Know about the company, what they offer and ask specific questions for elaboration. In summary, make it easier for employers to help you become part of their team.

University degrees have proven to be the golden ticket. Overall, people who have degrees have higher quality of life, life expectancy and life satisfaction. Comparatively, income is also higher among university graduates.

However, the golden ticket is not simply awarded on the day of graduation with a degree parchment. There are dos and do nots of turning a university degree into a successful career journey. This article shares these strategies and tips.

Not All Degrees Are Equal

This statement is intended generally and for individuals. The employment market ebbs, flows and changes. Before you enrol in university, use the internet to search which careers are hot and which are not. Search and find your dream jobs. What degrees do they call for? Are they generalist degrees like Humanities or Computer Science, or career specific like Accounting and Engineering?

Research shows that there are top strategies that increase a university graduate's chances of getting a good job. Pursuing a large number of these means starting early and following through in a well-planned manner alongside your studies. The top strategies, starting with the technology specific ones, are as follows:

- developing graduate portfolios, profiles and records of achievement
- social media and online networks (e.g. LinkedIn)
- work experience, internships and placements
- careers advice and employment skill development
- finding a mentor
- attending networking or industry information events
- engaging in extra-curricular activities
- professional association membership / engagement
- volunteering / community engagement
- part-time employment
- international exchange
- capstone / final semester projects.

You do not have to pursue these strategies on your own. Almost every university has a career development centre. The biggest complaint I heard from staff working in these centres is that students do not show up to them until their final semester, and by then it is too late to put most of the strategies in place.

Students are encouraged to visit the centre on their first semester on-campus. Use the expertise of the staff and listen to their advice.

Another pet-peeve of employers is that a large number of students assumed that good grades would be all they needed to get a job. The bell-curve ranks students from a pass to high-distinction. Some students assume that the career marketplace will do the same and that the students with the high-distinctions will get the best jobs and so on down the line. There is an element of the truth in this, in that grades are one factor in selection criteria. However, grades are only one factor. It is not enough to concentrate on grades to the exclusion of establishing networks, gaining practical experience, and developing the skills that a graduate needs to meet the selection criteria. Some skills will not be met in the degree study itself and must be pursued through enrolling in practical workshops and online tutorials such as those available on Lynda.com.

Careers fairs are a must for university students. It is recommended that secondary students start attending them at their local universities prior to enrolling to help decide what degree to pursue. University students should start attending in first year and all of the way through their degrees. In Australia, career fairs are held in March and this is when employees focus their recruitment efforts.

Self-presentation At Career Fairs

Dress in business casual and be neat, tidy and well-groomed. Wear a big smile. Career fairs are always crowded and hot, so try to wear breathable clothes. If you get nervous, keep something in your pocket to wipe before shaking hands with employers so that you do not offer them a sweaty palm. Shake hands firmly and confidently. Provide your full name.

Research each booth before you approach it. Avoid asking the following four questions. Employers told me over and over that they hear these four questions all day long at the career fairs and each time, they cringe. You should cringe too because you have just sacrificed an employment opportunity.

- What is <x> company?
- What do you do?
- What jobs do you have?
- How do I get a job with you?

Do your research *before* the day of the career fair. Often you can pre-register and will then receive an online list of companies

in attendance. Read about them, go to their career postings and know what types of careers they have and the selection criteria. If an employer's booth catches you by surprise on the day of the fair, discreetly go away from the booth and do a quick search on your smartphone before you approach them. Now you are ready.

Here is what employers would like to hear and this is a direct quote from recruiters at a multi-national corporation.

"Hi, my name is [insert first name and surname]. I am in my [year] year of studies at [name] university. I will graduate in [month, year] with a degree in [subject]. I see that you have a graduate development internship program relevant to my degree and I am in the process of preparing my application. Can you please answer a couple of questions to support my application? e.g. I noticed you have four regional offices. Do you offer the internship in [career] at all four? ..."

Graduate Development Plans

Many employers now realise that a successful and productive team member requires training and support from the university and on-the-job. Employers have started offering graduate development programs to up-skill new hires. Sometimes these programs commence in the summer sessions while students are still in the process of completing their degrees. The rationale is that early planning and preparation on the part of employers means that new hires are ready to hit the ground running. One large multi-national company reported that they would not be joining other companies at the March career fairs because they had already filled their numerous vacancies through their successful graduate development program. The key for those seeking jobs is to search early and apply for opportunities while still in university.

When I made the rounds to employers and asked them what was the key to standing out from the crowd in order to be hired, the most frequent response was 'carefully address the selection criteria'. It is extremely important not to gloss over this point. Candidates must carefully assess how they meet each criterion, answer succinctly and provide evidence. Writing a good application follows from actually having skills and experience to report. This is where early internet searches come into play. Search the dream jobs and be sure to enrol in experiences that enable you to meet the selection criteria.



Start in high school. Participate in an international exchange. Take on volunteer work. Run for student leadership. These activities will ensure that you meet the selection criteria when the time comes to apply.

International Experience

Another frequent response when I asked employers why they chose some applicants over others was international experience. They said that international experience demonstrates that people are willing to step outside their comfort zones and take risks. Employers reported that such experience is maturing and that the consequences are obvious in the attributes of those who have travelled. Employers added that the international experience is particularly impressive when conducted in a country where English is not the first language. This demonstrates an extra element of courage and personal investment.

Portfolios

Many employers value electronic portfolios. A portfolio is a collection of best works, presented together in a cohesive, professional and themed manner. Portfolios may be available to employers as a website or delivered with the application on USB or DVD. Do not include everything in your ePortfolio. Map your portfolio to the selection criteria. Make sure it is easy to navigate. Do not assume that the employer will open your portfolio. They simply may not have time. Your application should stand alone without it, and your portfolio should be a bonus.

Stay In Contact

One of the many advantages of modern communication is that we are never out of contact. Provide your email address and mobile number on each and every document, including your cover letter, criteria statement and resume. Watch your email and phone for messages and return them promptly and politely when they arrive.


Digital Footprint

Most of us have many social media accounts and, therefore, an available digital presence. Did you know that most employers search Google, Google Images, LinkedIn and other sites when deciding whether to shortlist you? Be aware of this digital footprint while in secondary school. It is difficult to remove reputation-damaging photos and blogs after they have been posted. They will not be perceived as funny to employers and will

result in applications moving to the do-not-interview pile. Next time you are caught in a compromising position that will leave a digital footprint, think about the consequences.

Do start a professional digital footprint early. Open an account in LinkedIn. Create a professional profile and start uploading positive evidence of your skills and experience. Secondary school is not too early to begin.

It has often been said that finding a job is a full-time job. In fact, it is more than that. Successful, satisfying employability is a lifelong journey that deserves heightened attention starting in secondary school. Waiting until after the university graduation ceremony is too late. Fortunately, we live in a time where

digital and connected technologies enable and enhance the career journey in ways never before possible. 

Dr Shelley Kinash is the Director of Learning and Teaching, and Associate Professor Higher Education at Bond University on the Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia. Shelley has been an academic for twenty years, first in Canada and then in Australia. Her PhD topic was blind online learners and she is an active researcher in the field of education. She is currently conducting collaborative, inter-university research on assurance of learning, and university improvement and student engagement through student evaluation of courses and teaching.

DON'T

- Assume that degrees are all equal in terms of your future employability
- Think that all you need is the piece of paper with your degree confirmed as your ticket to employment
- Leave your employability preparations to your final semester
- Try to go it alone
- Spend 100 per cent of your time studying
- Spoil the opportunity of careers fairs through sweaty handshakes, asking representatives what their company does, or by seeming to demand a job as an entitlement
- Overlook company's Graduate Development Programs and Internships
- Rush through selection criterion in your job applications. NEVER write 'see above' as if you have already answered the given criteria
- Overlook the opportunity of international experience
- Forget to demonstrate your skills through an electronic portfolio. Do not include everything. Make sure there is a strong theme. Do not assume the employer will have the time to read it
- Go out of contact or take too long to respond
- Ignore or embarrass yourself through your digital footprints

DO

- Use the internet to search dream jobs and research which degrees are listed as essential criteria
- Take advantage of the full range of employability strategies your university supports
- Start early, taking advantage of technology-enhanced strategies from your first semester
- Sign up with your university career development centre in your first semester, taking advantage of their expertise
- Grades and the accompanying learning are important, but so too are community networks and extracurricular pursuits
- Career fairs are important employability events and must be handled well. Dry your hand and shake firmly. Move to another part of the fair, search each company on your smartphone before visiting the booth, and ask informed questions about opportunities
- Search the company's opportunities and apply for these spots to demonstrate your skills and attributes
- Spend the time carefully mapping your knowledge, skills, attributes and experiences to what the company is looking for; search their mission statement and other key documents to help
- Consider taking up an international experience that pushes your limits and opens up your thinking
- Put time into a focussed, professional electronic portfolio. Not all employers have time to view them, so your resume must still stand alone. In any case, preparing the portfolio is strong interview preparation
- Provide an email address and mobile number and watch both carefully for contact
- Have a strong digital presence through professional sites such as LinkedIn. Google yourself and take the time to attempt to remove compromising images and other such content